

Matteo Renzi's disastrous leadership risks splitting Italy's Democratic Party

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Former Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi has resigned as leader of the country's Democratic Party (PD) with the intention of running in primary elections to be held later in the year. [Iacopo Mugnai](#) argues that Renzi's leadership has had a disastrous effect on the party, while his current strategy risks splitting the PD and opening the door to government for Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement.



On 19 February, former Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi resigned as secretary of the Democratic Party (PD) and announced his intention to run for the primary elections that will be held once the party congress takes place, most probably in May 2017. With a high dose of cynical opportunism, Renzi is trying to secure his political leadership (and career) at the expense of the PD, the Italian political/party system and, potentially, the whole country. Although there is no doubt that it was the rejection of Renzi's constitutional reform that triggered the political crisis the PD is now witnessing, it is important to recognise that the crisis began well before the referendum on 4 December last year. Indeed, there are two orders of causes at play: proximate and systemic.



Matteo Renzi in 2013, after having announced his candidature as PD's leader.

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Regarding proximate causes, Renzi's leadership is the pivotal factor behind the current forces leading toward a breakup of the PD. Since he took office in 2014 – overthrowing Enrico Letta as prime minister – he has personalised the party, the policy agenda and the government. Renzi's leadership was aimed at constructing the image of a self-sufficient prime minister in full control of the executive and, with less enthusiasm, the party. However, as Margaret Thatcher's experience shows, a "command premiership" is not necessarily conducive to good government or political success. As long as she had the support of pivotal allies within the Tory party and the cabinet (e.g. Willie Whitelaw, Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson) Thatcher was able to implement her tough neoliberal/monetarist

agenda. Once she started feeling self-sufficient and creating unnecessary animosity (e.g. with the Poll Tax or in the case of ERM membership) she began to lose control of the cabinet and the party, leading to her humiliating resignation, which left a bitter sentiment within the Conservative party, damaging its electoral fortunes for many years.

Unfortunately, Renzi's style of leadership has followed Thatcher's model, deploying a similar logic of "wet and dries" – those with me and those "against" me. He was never willing to listen to party colleagues when it came to concerns over the government's contestable policy agenda or the problematic aspects of his constitutional reform. When it was clear that more left-wing members of the PD were likely to leave the party in response to Renzi's attitude towards their criticism, the prime minister seemed not to care.

The result of Renzi's leadership of the PD has been disastrous. Katz and Mair's famous "three faces of party organization" offers a useful lens to assess the damage. Regarding the "party in public office" face, since 2015 9 MPs have left the PD in opposition to Renzi's management of the party and the policy agenda of his government. As a consequence of the outcome of the PD assembly on 19 February, almost 60 MPs (20 senators and 40 deputies) might form a new political group separate from the PD but supporting Paolo Gentiloni's government.

Concerning the "party central office" face, that party leaders like former secretary Pier Luigi Bersani were not attending the party assembly is instructive of the malaise within the central office. Renzi's decision to have primary elections by the summer is a move intended to secure control of the PD and prevent challengers from strengthening, although this is already causing centrifugal dynamics among party leaders. With regard to the third face, "the party on the ground", the PD is not in better shape, as demonstrated by its sharp decline in membership rates, the results of the 2016 administrative elections and the constitutional referendum. Despite his rhetoric of innovation and change, Renzi's leadership turned the PD into a formidable electoral machine which ultimately did not serve Renzi's ambitions and dramatically harmed the party in all its three faces.

Nonetheless, the crisis the PD is now witnessing is also the consequence of systemic causes that go beyond Renzi's tenure of the party, requiring broader self-critique within the national and regional party leadership. The rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe is not only the legacy of 30 years of increasing inequality, stagnating wages and public bailouts of troubling financial institutions. It is also a consequence of the fact that today's European social democracy stands for little in the way of values and, being so imbricated with the system now in crisis, it has no political alternative to offer. Hence, it comes as no surprise that social democrats' traditional constituencies now vote for *Alternative für Deutschland*, Marine Le Pen, the Austrian Freedom Party or, in the US, for Donald Trump. This is not to say that Renzi has no responsibility, and was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the contrary, the key point is that Renzi, his party colleagues and advisers either did not understand or deliberately ignored the causes and implications of the decline of left-wing parties and rise of populist forces in Europe.

A responsible outgoing party leader would manage the leadership transition in the interest of the party and, given Italy's situation, the country as well. Unfortunately, Renzi is not showing such responsibility. The PD needs a new secretary and a credible leadership (nationally and regionally) able to articulate a political project and elaborate an intelligent electoral strategy. The former requires a serious reflection on the values the post-Renzi PD wants to stand for, who to represent and which project to articulate. Then, the new leadership must elaborate an electoral strategy in support of the political project to be implemented. Unfortunately, there is a lack of both time and names available for this task, although candidates up to the job could emerge if the party congress was delayed until October or November.

The PD was born in 2007 with the ambition of being a majoritarian centre-left party. It is hard to see how such a majoritarian element can still be present if Renzi is going to secure a new mandate as party secretary. However, what is most worrisome about Renzi's failing leadership is its repercussions, which go beyond the PD's fate. Renzi entered into national politics to "rottamare" (scrap) old politicians responsible for the country's economic misfortunes and to renovate the Italian political economy for the good of the younger and the talented. Despite this, soon after taking the PD leadership, and with much folly, Renzi reached a political agreement in January 2014 with Silvio

Berlusconi on the new electoral law (reappraised in its essence by the Constitutional Court last January) and the constitutional reform (largely rejected by those youths Renzi had desperately tried to reach). Despite his rhetoric of change and Virginia Raggi's embarrassing management of Rome, the more Renzi remained in power the stronger the Five Star Movement became.

As the Italian right is not in good shape (apart from Salvini's Northern League) and due to the PD drama, the Five Star Movement is likely to face few challengers in anticipated elections (although we still do not know what the electoral law will be). This is Renzi's main responsibility. Pier Luigi Bersani lost an easy victory in 2013 without, however, splitting the party. Since Renzi became party secretary, several MPs have left the PD in opposition to his agenda and have begun arguing in favour of Italy leaving the euro. As long as such an idea is the monopoly of disputable personalities within the Northern League or Five Star Movement, it remains a manageable issue. But when it becomes the argument of people like Stefano Fassina (former PD MP and deputy-minister of economics and finance with Enrico Letta) and big names like Joseph Stiglitz start [considering an amicable divorce](#) from EMU as preferable to the current situation, then it becomes a completely different matter.

A change in the ideational consensus can translate into institutional change as soon as a window of opportunity opens. Matteo Renzi's policy agenda and leadership style provided many windows of opportunity for such change. It is now time for Matteo Renzi, for those academics close to him and for his party comrades to show more responsibility, less polemic will and a much broader vision.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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